



## Corruption and Catastrophe: DePalma's "Carrie"

Paula Matusa

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PAULA MATUSA

## CORRUPTION AND CATASTROPHE: DEPALMA'S **CARRIE**

*Carrie* is Brian DePalma's best feature film to date. It strikes a pleasing balance between plot line, character motivation, and visual style—a balance notably absent in *Sisters*, *Phantom of the Paradise*, and *Obsession*. In the three earlier films, DePalma's undeniable visual panache is applied to twists and turns of the story line that are never very convincing or compelling. In *Carrie*, however, DePalma develops his familiar motifs of exploitation, guilt, and sexual repression with a sure hand, so that his visual fireworks for the first time do not seem themselves obsessional and out of control.

As the film begins, Carrie is introduced as a painfully withdrawn, childish-looking highschool girl, on the receiving end of her classmates' malicious abuse. In the next scene, she is presented in quite a different light: very much a woman in the shower room, though the lilting music, the soft focus, and the fluid dissolves from one shot of her anatomy to another suggest that she is unaware of her womanhood, and unaware of adulthood's attendant demands. This series of dissolves ends abruptly, and in the next few shots a terrified Carrie discovers her menstrual blood. As she runs out into the locker room, she is once again abused by her classmates and slapped by the gym teacher. This time, however, Carrie does respond with a kind of self-assertive anger, manifested in the form of telekinesis—the power to move objects without physical contact. When the girls torment Carrie here, she causes a light bulb to shatter, and later, when the edgy principal repeatedly addresses her as Cassie Wright instead of Carrie White, she causes an ashtray in his office to overturn and shatter. She then leaves the office without being excused and slams the door, an action she certainly wouldn't have taken as the timid child at the beginning of the film. Carrie's emerging a-

dulthood is accompanied by a power that seems to give her the will to a new and refreshing self-assertiveness. Unfortunately, though, her self-assertiveness at this point is basically an angry response to provocation, and its power is potentially destructive.

Carrie's mother, a woman with wild red hair who preaches "salvation through the blood of Christ," views her daughter's emerging womanhood as a prelude to sin and misery. Carrie wants to deal openly and honestly with her newfound adulthood and sexuality, but her mother will only rant and rave about the stain on women in general. She refuses to deal with the particular physical and emotional changes Carrie is undergoing. In what seems to be an effort to put an end to, or at least forestall, those changes, Mrs. White drags her daughter into a small dark closet and demands prayer and penance. Mrs. White does not take kindly to change or progress of any sort. The house she lives in is not only old, it is positively fixated in the past, as are her dated kitchen appliances and sewing machine. She prefers candle power to electricity whenever possible. As far as Mrs. White is concerned, any change will serve only to add considerably to the already lengthy distance between humans and their original pristine innocence. She does take to repeating phrases and slogans from the Bible, as if in so doing she might suspend herself in a state of grace with the Lord.

Mrs. White's desire to return to a guiltless past is only one of the many motifs *Carrie* has in common with Brian DePalma's other major feature films. The themes of victimization, sexual repression, and exploitation running through *Carrie* are all central concerns in *Phantom of the Paradise*, *Sisters*, and *Obsession*, and Carrie, the vulnerable main character, in many ways typifies DePalma's protagonists. Winslow, in *Phantom of the Para-*

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*dise*, like Carrie, appears to be one of life's victims who is harassed and abused on all sides. His innocence and ignorance make him an easy target for rock entrepreneur Swan, who gets hold of his opera and has him thrown in jail on trumped-up charges. We feel immediate concern for Winslow, but because he so foolishly signs his composition away, our sympathies cannot fully remain on his side. We can't help but feel that Winslow's ignorance, like Carrie's extreme vulnerability, seems to call for exploitation and abuse. Winslow's desire to produce his rock opera, like Carrie's desire to accept her womanhood, is an affirmative goal, but he appears to be incapable of keeping up the momentum with a pattern of assertive actions. Winslow spends most of his energy *reacting* to brutal beatings and mutilations, just as Carrie spends her power reacting to brutal psychic chastisements.

Danielle, the young model in *Sisters*, has to deal with a former husband and a twin sister who seem bent on repressing her sexuality. Her sister, Dominique, though not a religious fanatic like Mrs. White, is particularly angry with Danielle after she brings a young man to the apartment and spends the night with him. Though we admire Danielle's determination to make a new life for herself after a recent divorce, there is a side to her personality that immediately makes us uneasy, and it has something to do with the vulnerability Carrie and Winslow have in common. *Sisters* opens as a young blind girl enters a room and begins to undress, unaware of the fact that a man is also present in the room. Or so it all seems. In the next scene we learn that the whole episode has been set up by a voyeuristic TV game show (a scene which, incidentally, has ties going back to one of DePalma's early short films in which Robert DeNiro plays a voyeuristic peep art film-maker). The contestants make their bets according to how they believe the young man (who is unaware of the TV camera) will react to the situation. Danielle plays the blind girl. This role serves to exploit Danielle, and particularly her sexuality, yet she has taken it of her own accord. She is, in a sense, establishing a kind of vulnerability that calls for abuse.

In *Obsession*, Michael Courtland is the innocent and somewhat ignorant victim who is exploited by his astute real estate partner, Robert La-



(Above) Winslow set upon by harpies at the Paradise.

(Below) Disfigured, he confronts his nemesis, the demonic promoter, Swan (Paul Williams).

Salle. In order to get hold of Michael's share of the business LaSalle plans a kidnapping which is botched, and as a result Michael's wife and daughter die. Fifteen years later, in a Florentine church, Michael meets Sondra, his former wife's very double. The issue of arrested sexuality in conjunction with pairs of characters arises in this film, as it does in *Carrie* and *Sisters*, but with a slightly different twist. Michael loses his wife to the kidnappers just before the two are to make love. Later, when Michael meets Sondra, all sexual overtures are kept on ice. Sondra speaks of being a



OBSESSION: Michael and Sondra/Amy

virgin and a good Catholic, and Michael goes along with this, as if the loss of his wife, coming at the moment it did, meant to him the loss of his sexuality as well. His idealization of Sondra indicates a tendency for self-effacement, and, indeed, Michael's one-dimensional personality seems to recede even further into the background once Sondra appears.

Winslow, Danielle, and Michael establish certain self-destructive patterns as their respective films progress, whereas Carrie (for a time) moves in the opposite direction. When she learns more about the nature of her power from a book in the school library she decides to accept an invitation to the prom despite her mother's pleas and warnings. Every time mother threatens to get in the way, Carrie simply uses telekinesis to move her aside. Carrie takes over center frame at this point in the film, as she confidently readies herself for the prom with a new dress, hairstyle, and make-up, while her mother looks on with horror. Mrs. White is occasionally seen pacing the floor and tearing her hair, but her position in the corner of the frame, and the tilted frame itself, suggest that she no longer has any power over Carrie, and that the insulated reality of her world is shattering. The unbalanced camera angles, however, are frightening as well, and in addition to two particular shots in this scene, they portend no easy solution to the situation between Carrie and Mrs. White as it now stands. In one of those shots Carrie and her mother both rush to the window to see if Tommy, Carrie's date, has arrived. They linger there for a moment, and the composition of the two faces framed by the win-

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dow is reminiscent of a shot of the faces of Alma and Elizabet in *Persona*. In both films, the two women, who are opposites of sorts, experience a momentary peaceful hiatus before their opposition breaks out into warfare. In the other shot, Carrie dashes downstairs to meet Tommy, but the camera doesn't follow her as we might expect. Instead, it zooms in on mother as she rises from Carrie's bed saying, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

The shot of mother rising from Carrie's bed effectively establishes the very powerful and compelling presence of evil in the film. Mrs. White, menacing and horrible as she may be, radiates a certain dignity that is not altogether unappealing. Chris and her boyfriend Billy embody another kind of engaging evil in the film. They have arranged for Carrie to be crowned prom queen, at which time they plan to shower her with a bucketful of pig's blood. For the most part, we find Chris, Billy, and some of the other plotters despicable, and yet they are in many ways undeniably attractive characters. All are extremely good-looking, assertive, and somewhat rebellious, and what's more, they have exclusive rights to the film's humor. They are able to laugh and even scheme with a certain ease and grace that is completely alien to Carrie's self-conscious style.

This also holds true of LaSalle in *Obsession*. Though an abominable character, his savoir faire, refinement, and presence completely overshadow any redeeming features Michael may have. As far as appearances go, both Swan and the doctor (Danielle's ex-husband) tend to make one queasy, yet both do have the strength to take easy and efficient command of a situation or a crisis. Of course, none of these characters survives, but then neither Carrie nor Winslow does any better, and Michael and Danielle will probably end up in prison. The wrong-doers in these films, because of their devious strength and their guilt-free ability to trample other people, manage to lead fairly rich, though short, lives.

The exploited characters in DePalma's films are the ones who experience needless anxiety and remorse, and ultimately they end up victims not only of a brutal world, but of their own guilty obsessions as well. Carrie seemingly manages to break free from an oppressive upbringing, and to turn her desperate desire to belong into a healthy

reality (for a time at least), but some of DePalma's other characters are never granted even such a short interval of peace. Danielle, we learn, is the surviving half of a pair of Siamese twins separated by surgery. Her sister, Dominique, died as a result of the operation, and Danielle, obsessed and guilt-ridden, takes on Dominique's personality as one separate and distinct from her own. Danielle makes a few futile attempts to get on with life and to live in the present, but every time she forsakes her sister (who is very much alive in her) for a man, the Dominique side of her personality emerges and does away with him, permanently. When Dominique was alive, she was the repressed and censorious twin, whereas her sister was always rather cheerful and outgoing. Dominique constantly argued and pleaded against Danielle's affair with their doctor, and when Dominique dies, Danielle finds she is internalizing the censor that was in the past her sister's projection. The opening scene of *Sisters* comes into perspective in light of Danielle's obsession. Danielle feels she must in a sense blind herself to her own sexuality in order not to hurt Dominique. Perhaps this is why she has to get drunk before she can take the young man home with her; she doesn't want to take responsibility for her actions. Also, the man first led on by the blind girl and caught by the TV camera is later again led on by Danielle and

trapped in a much more macabre situation. By the end of the film Danielle murders the doctor-lover who separated her from Dominique. We feel the murder is justified, for the doctor was a demented character indeed, but his death does not bring about any catharsis or return to reality for Danielle, as it might in a classic horror film. She continues to live with the illusion of her sister, completely oblivious to the murders she has committed in Dominique's name.

Michael Courtland torments himself as the perpetrator of his wife's death, despite the fact that he had little, if anything, to do with it. He refuses to live in the present because he is subconsciously transforming his life into an effort to find retribution, to make up for the death. Like Danielle, he wants justice, but justice at the price of the present. Michael has a good opportunity to return to reality when he meets his bride-to-be, but instead he chooses to incorporate her into his myth of the past, and to relive his past through her. Michael's dreams of going to bed with his new wife are followed by a dream-like scene in which he discovers the second kidnapping note. As in the past, Michael's sexuality and the loss of his wife are in a way connected, and we suspect that this

OBSESSION: *The climactic last scene—shot and counter-shot*



aspect of his character will be forever repressed. The film's ending confirms our suspicions. Michael and his daughter Amy are reconciled, but their new situation together is hardly a hopeful one. Amy (Sondra) will constantly remind Michael of his wife, but the fact that she is his daughter will probably serve to blunt his sexuality permanently. At the beginning of the film, LaSalle, who sets up the kidnapping scheme, is of course the one to blame for Michael's torment and grief. By the end of the film, however, Michael is so full of guilt and self-hate that he is willing to fall for the second kidnapping note, and perhaps it isn't stupidity as much as a desire for self-punishment that impels him to do this. Michael murders LaSalle when he learns the truth about the kidnapping schemes, and in so doing he is trying to kill a part of himself. LaSalle will die, but the role of murderer LaSalle has imposed on Michael will not die with him, for Michael internalized it long ago. As in *Sisters*, there is no sense of catharsis accompanying the villain's death. There remains only the certainty of Michael's continued entanglement with his past—a modern-day Sisyphus.

Though Winslow, like Danielle and Michael, is a victim of exploitation at the beginning of *Phantom of the Paradise*, he doesn't internalize the forces working against him to the extent that these two do. He does, of course, have reasons to be angry with himself for so foolishly signing his music away, and perhaps, as a result of this, his accident in the record pressing machine is only partially an accident. None the less, Winslow's feelings of anger and betrayal are for the most part directed toward the outside world, rather than toward himself. The style of the film seems to demand such expression. *Phantom of the Paradise* is a flashy, fast-paced film compared to *Obsession*, which, despite the sweeping camera movements, is a rather contemplative, slow-moving work. Even the more violent *Sisters* is photographed in such a fashion as to eliminate the possibility of physical violence on any large scale. The immobile camera and the tight angles often used in *Sisters* convey a sense of claustrophobia and suffocation. We feel this immediately when we find that the opening reality proves to be circumscribed by a TV screen. Violence tends to implode here, and in *Obsession*'s open setting it tends to be diluted into a sense of

aimlessness and hopelessness. Winslow, however, finds himself in a highly volatile and openly violent world, as his experiences with Swan's henchmen attest. The corruption at the heart of *Phantom of the Paradise* is similar to that found in *Sisters* and *Obsession*, except for the fact that here, partially because the film is a satire, the corruption is immediately revealed, made explicit, and magnified. The response to such corruption is, in turn, explicit and externalized. We might conjecture about Michael Courtland's future, but there is no question as to the fates of Swan and Winslow. This violence exposed, or made manifest, does not, however, offer the catharsis missing in *Sisters* and *Obsession*. The violence here doesn't clear the way for something better; it is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. Swan, hearing of plans to televise his bride's assassination, comments "That's entertainment!" The violence Winslow initiates in order to destroy Swan and everything he stands for serves ironically only to illustrate Swan's beliefs. It's all entertainment and the frenzied crowd feeds on it. Despite the fact that Winslow and Swan die, we get the feeling that this type of nightmarish theater will perpetuate itself into eternity.

The closing scenes of *Carrie* contain the large-scale physical violence as well as the obsessive internalized fury found in the other three films. The climax of the prom scene occurs moments after Carrie is crowned queen, when she is showered with the pig's blood. The destruction she inflicts in response to this outrage is notable not only because of its severity, but also because it intimates quite a change of character for Carrie. The power that once accompanied Carrie's ability to control and direct her life is now out of control; she commits indiscriminate violence, and her actions here are comparable to those of the avenging God with whom her mother is so obsessed. Indeed, the "sinners" at the prom are plagued with Carrie's versions of storm, fire, and earthquake.

Carrie returns home to find a house illuminated by thousands of candles, and to find mother conspicuously absent. As Carrie proceeds to bathe and then put on a nightgown, a further change in her character is revealed. Gone is the young woman who was depicted earlier in the steamy sensuality of the shower room. In her place we see

CARRIE: *Carrie  
blasts and  
burns the entire  
high school.*



a young girl huddled in a semi-fetal position in a bathtub, scrubbing away the blood and make-up that accompanied her debut as woman. Carrie's return to childhood is given a final touch when she dons a young girl's long, shapeless, flannel nightgown. Mother emerges from the darkness as Carrie leaves the bathroom, and we notice a change in her appearance too. She is dressed for the first time not in black, but in an ivory lace and satin nightgown. Mrs. White is making a return of her own, a return to her wedding day and to a former state of virginity and innocence. In order to atone for her past sin of intercourse, mother feels she must go back to a time of purity before Carrie's conception and remove all traces of that sin. Thus, she must destroy Carrie. Getting down on her knees, Mrs. White speaks with disgust of the one night she submitted to her husband's advances. Soon, however, her confession and movements become tinged with eroticism as she takes on not the purity, but the imminent sexuality, of a young bride. Breathlessly she continues on about her husband's "filthy touching," and admits, "I liked it, I liked it!" Mrs. White then rises with a surge of unleashed sexual energy, takes a heretofore hidden knife, and stabs Carrie in the back. Carrie, still alive, falls down the stairs and huddles in a corner as mother performs a giddy dance of death around her before raising the knife for a final blow. Carrie anticipates her mother's thrust, how-

ever, and using her powers she nails mother to the wall with a barrage of knives and kitchen utensils. Mother dies a remarkably peaceful-looking and, for the first time, beautiful woman. Though she is crucified in a position similar to that of the tormented Christ seen earlier in the film, Mrs.



*Mrs. White after confession (knife in hand)*

White has no trace of anguish on her face. Her last orgasmic moans are an appropriate preface to her death, since death, mother's ultimate release from sin, is ironically tied to penetration and sexual release.

As the film comes to an end, Carrie literally pulls her mother off the wall, and returns to the closet she rejected as a young woman. There is no peace in death for Carrie as there is for her mother. A few glimpses of Carrie hunched up in the closet intercut with shots of the burning, collapsing house and the quaking Christ statue suggest that she dies a tormented child. The film's closing sequence carries forth this idea. In a

lyrical soft-focus scene, the single survivor of the prom massacre brings a bouquet of flowers to Carrie's grave. This sequence has tremendous shock value because the audience is set up to expect a rather peaceful, bland ending. DePalma gives us hope for a release from the film's torment and violence, only to catch us when we are most vulnerable, as Carrie is caught at the prom and at home afterward. The shock ending is perhaps DePalma's way of impressing upon the audience a sense of anxiety and apprehension without let up or relief. Carrie is dead, but here, as in DePalma's other films, we feel the torment will go on forever. There is no peace.

**PAUL WARSHOW**

## More Is Less: Comedy and Sound

*Recent "improvements" to Keaton's classic silent comedy The General raise major aesthetic questions as well as practical ones of fidelity to an artist's work. For silent comedy was not just a form that happened accidentally to be deprived of sound. Its silence, broken only by music, was an essential constituent of its stylization—of the very qualities that made it uniquely comic. In the article below Paul Warshow describes how tampering with The General does subtle violence to the work of one of our greatest film-makers, and sets an ominous precedent.*

One of the saddest facts about moviegoing is that one can almost never get to see a film the way the film-maker intended it to be seen. First there are the mutilations made even before the film's release: tampering by the producer with the director's completed work, or at earlier stages in production, cuts forced by the censor, etc. Then, there are the defects in individual prints. Even first-run prints can be off in color, or in other ways; and new prints of old films can be very poor. With older prints, the picture gets scratched and faded; the sound gets blurred and faint; frames are destroyed, throwing the rhythm off, causing not only visual

discontinuities but also the loss of syllables and notes of music. And when the negative is not cared for, good new prints become impossible. Moreover, whatever quality a print has is often sabotaged in the projection, either by inferior equipment or by the projectionist himself—so that the picture is faint or out-of-focus or cropped, the sound is fuzzy or at the wrong level, or the reels are shown in the wrong order.

All the above post-release losses are due to passivity: the failure to expend effort or money. The sins involved are sins of omission. But there is another, opposite way in which an old film can be